

In Conversation: Azura Farid & Isaac Tan on *People, Places & Things* by Duncan Macmillan (Pangdemonium)

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By Azura Farid & Isaac Tan



Photo: Pangdemonium

In this free-ranging conversation, Azura Farid and Isaac Tan respond to *People, Places & Things*. The following transcript has been edited for clarity.

Isaac: Maybe we could start with overall impressions?

Azura: I felt I was really taken on a journey. So much of the performance and the production hinges on Sharda Harrison's performance in the lead role. There were so many points where I was thinking, my gosh, this is such a gruelling experience for an actor to be putting themselves through seven to eight times a week.

Isaac: I agree. It's a very gruelling production. But it's very well done. There are moments where they really push it to the edge — partying hard, and really suffering from the effects later on. There were moments, I thought they might have been carried away with the

direction or performance, but when the show ends, you realise, it's all part of the design and choreographed in a certain way, which makes it quite amazing.

Isaac: What do you think of the setup? Given that the Singtel Waterfront Theatre is fully customisable, the traverse staging — basically a model runway — is an intentional choice. It's basically a white box; a white runway with high walls on each end.

Azura: With this configuration where the whole audience can never see the characters head-on all the time, to me it felt like it was saying you can never really see someone in their entirety; you can only ever have part of the whole story. What do you think?

Isaac: I was wondering if such a choice was made to allow the audience to detach themselves from the show a little bit in case it's too triggering for people. Also, the endless possibilities in which a white box can transform into any setting lends an ephemeral quality. This might reflect the hazy memory one has when one is addicted. And director Tracie Pang really explored the full possibilities of staging — from the mundane to the psychedelic and disorientating scenes.

Azura: Like that bit with the bed in the beginning, right? The first time the multiple Emmas are all coming out of the same bed.

Isaac: Oh yeah, that was amazing! Multiple Emmas were crawling out of the slit in the bed as the bed sheet rises and falls flat every time. It felt like a scene from a horror movie. Shortly after, Sharda Harrison as Emma just lies on the bed as if there was no hole to begin with. The technical wizardry is astounding! Speaking of multiple Emmas, what do you feel about the presence of multiple actors as Emma?

Azura: All the scenes with multiple Emmas — same hair and clothes — are very, very unnerving.

Isaac: They are all showing the different stages of withdrawal at the same time. At first, it's just stomach pains, then at other times, they're on the floor screaming. With the strobe light... you know how they portray drug addiction in TV or film, whereby the viewers get the addict's point of view and everything's a bit fuzzy? I felt that the director is trying to recreate that. But given that you are hearing the groaning or screaming live, that's even scarier.

Azura: The first time we see them, when it progresses to Emma scratching herself, and then one of them tries to hang herself from the lamp — kudos to Tracie and to movement director Andy Benjamin Cai for making it such a visceral experience to watch all these people experiencing such discomfort. And these trippy experiences were also conveyed with sound and projections.

Isaac: Speaking of projections, there were glowing squares to represent the club scene as Emma and others were partying very hard. Suddenly, the colours were all in a huge swirl. On one hand, I read that as Emma being so high that she has this psychedelic

experience. On the other, with everything in the centre, and the swirl is quite big, I had this image of everything going down the toilet; like her life is going down the toilet, before the scene where we see her just outside the rehab, cursing at her mum on the phone.



Azura: We get the clubbing bit, which was also trippy, and then when she's snorting coke off the chair in the reception, we have that first moment of everything going spinny, and the sound, I think that's the first time it's established that this is the vocabulary we're using for an episode.

Isaac: And the projection is so precise, with exit signs or outlines of a door on the other side. Apart from the obvious ones — with the clubbing and psychedelic episodes — I think I'm most impressed towards the end, when the projection was a slightly different angle, so Emma's room felt like it was tilted; it was slanted a little bit. In the first half, her room was flat, but in the second half, I was wondering why her room was tilted at an angle. I realised it was because of the projection angle of the tiles on the floor, but when they turn off the projection, you realise it is just a flat stage!

Another beautiful moment has to do with the floors of the rehab facility. In the scene just before Emma's first withdrawal, the projection on the floor is just black lines to form tiles across the floor. However, the black lines start to fade and become wavy, until it turns into a swimming pool, then it turns into a sea.

Azura: And then when she's talking to the doctor and then dissociating, suddenly the doctor's voice has a very echoey sound that reminds you of being in a swimming pool.

Isaac: A basic reading is that it symbolises Emma is drowning in the addiction. But the progression of the projection to make such a simple symbolism is very precise.

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Azura: It also gives us a similar sensory experience to what Emma is supposed to be experiencing. In real life the doctor's voice is not going all echoey, but we're feeling what she's feeling.

Isaac: Kudos to the multimedia designer, Genevieve Peck.

Azura: I felt all the multimedia, sound, and lighting contributed to the overall effect very well, without any of those elements drawing attention to themselves for the sake of it.



Photo: Pandemonium

Isaac: What about the relationship between theatre and addiction? Even in the synopsis, it says that Emma is addicted to playing characters.

Azura: At first, because I hadn't read the play, I wondered if this was going to be the kind of play where you have empathy for Emma, with her addiction problem, but we're also judging her and saying that other people know best? And then I read the interview with Duncan Macmillan in the programme booklet, and I could see that he did want to take a very nuanced look at it. It's provocative, the comparison that the playwright is making between addiction and how it would appeal to people who perform for a living. What did you think?

Isaac: There is a sense of metatheatricality, but not in the usual sense of a play-within-the-play. The group meetings felt a bit like hot-seating, where the characters were asked to say who they're responding to, and what those people are like.

As this is also in the context of therapy, it feels a little like forum theatre, in the sense where they try to re-play or work out whatever problems they may have through re-enactments. We sort of know that's what goes on in therapy, but I've never ever linked it back to theatre that way.

Azura: These are like acting exercises, but for the character, this is their real life. There's also a shift in Emma's involvement. She doesn't want to do the roleplay the first time, but the others don't let her opt out. But after a few rounds, she's the one who wants to keep going, and you can see the toll that it's taking on her.

Isaac: And in a way, she gets addicted to playing all the roles within that group. So that was another layer of addiction that manifested in her... so complex.

Another great thing was, there are actually quite valid criticisms of rehab. At one point, Emma says, on one hand, you want us to take responsibility for our recovery, and on the other hand, you want us to admit that we are addicts, and therefore we are helpless and we need other people's help within the group setting.

Azura: And the questions she raises after she's read the book, how it has religious overtones that she doesn't subscribe to. Throughout the play, even once her rehab is going better, it did strike me how some of the language that the staff in rehab were using has religious connotations, which may or may not work for some people who are just there to get sober.

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Isaac: It's as if there's a doctrine on it. There's one way to be; that if you follow this way, you'll definitely be treated. I didn't think about the Christian origins of the 12-step programme but I just remembered there's this prayer of serenity. You have an interesting point about religion because I just saw it as being generally doctrinal. However, it does seem that there's actually a comment on religion itself.

Azura: The 12-step programme has some Christian origins, although the doctor says "we use a modified version of that programme". Even then, you do see them talking about the one way, the right way, or surrendering to a higher power.

Isaac: If only we could have a sense of how those in the psychological circles would react to these criticisms. That'd be interesting.

Azura: Right? I mean, I haven't read any. This play was first produced a few years ago, so I'm sure there's writing on how people who have experience with addiction, or are familiar with that kind of thing, like what people's opinions are of how he handled it, which

I haven't read so I can only speak from my point of view, as somebody who is not really familiar with all that entails, and coming out of it also not having looked at the writing that's out there.

Isaac: Yeah, me neither, but it's a good avenue for whoever is reading this transcript review to pursue and to think about.



Photo: Pangdemonium

Azura: Do we want to talk about the family scene at the end?

Isaac: I think that was very heartbreaking for a parent to say those things. Initially Emma makes fun of her father in the group therapy session, how he will just say “uh-huh, uh-huh”, and so when Adrian Pang comes out as a father, we expected that, but then he said “It’s true, I’d rather you be buried than your brother”, that was totally —

Azura: They say some really cruel things, and they also say some stuff which seems harsh but understandable when you hear about the effect that Emma’s addiction has had on them. Like, “every time the doorbell rang we thought it would be the police”, or “you broke my finger so I had to stop playing the piano”, “this family is broken”. Nobody has to be perfect patient saints; while their daughter is going through stuff, it affects them too.

But some of the really cruel stuff that they say, like “you should have died instead” or “you have no personality”, to me it half felt like the playwright was getting them to say really extreme stuff. Are we going that far for the sake of it, or is the playwright really trying to

show what's bubbling underneath? It's hard to say because we've never met these characters before, we're only going off bits and pieces of what Emma has said about them.

Isaac: On the very basic level it's supposed to show that recovery is an ongoing thing, it's never linear, and it's not always a happy ending. It could also be a shortcut to show the family members of the addicts are also affected really badly as well. But there's no easy way to resolve that because otherwise, that show would be way too long.

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Azura: That's true. And it is meant to show us that it's not fully resolved in that way. But even what the mum does — she's put the drugs in Sarah's room and then tells Sarah where she put them — to me it just seems like a really messed up way to test your own child, no matter how fed up you are. Again, is the playwright trying to suddenly raise the stakes at this point in the play, or genuinely trying to show how messed up her family is?

Isaac: I thought at that point in time that the parents are just frustrated, so they're 'stabbing' her, so to speak. When you say it like that, I realised it's way more messed up than when I first saw that scene. Any other performers that you want to talk about, apart from Sharda Harrison?



Photo: Pandemonium

Azura: Shona Benson, who plays the doctor, the therapist Lydia, and the mum. I thought she was very good at distinguishing her different characters, although I guess between the doctor and the therapist, switching between accents and between hair and hair

down is doing a lot of the work.

But her speech patterns and the way she uses her voice — not just the accents — are also completely different for the different characters. The doctor and the mum even speak with pretty much the same accent, but the way she uses her voice for the two characters is very different. I thought that was very well done.

Isaac: Definitely a standout performance. What do you think about Shane Mardjuki and Keagan Kang? They are unique as they mostly stayed with their characters, unlike the other actors.

Azura: I thought that Keegan's character, Foster, was really effective, when he first meets Emma, telling her not to smoke inside, but then when she's actually checked herself in and he's making silly jokes and showing her dog pictures to put her at ease, I thought that was very sweet and the dynamic between the two of them felt quite natural and believable. What did you think of Shane's performance as Mark?

Isaac: I'm just thinking more about the character itself. In the first half, he got her to smoke, but he changed so much in the second half. He becomes more like Foster's character.

Azura: I thought that was interesting too, but I guess the playwright does plant seeds so that even from the early scene, you can see he's a bit more cynical, he's been through treatment twice, and he's a 'bad influence' with offering her a cigarette. But he also calls her on her shit, like "the story you told is just the plot of Hedda Gabler", and later he says Emma's disengagement from the process is affecting all of them.

So you do see, even earlier on, that he's cynical about treatment but he's also taking it seriously in some ways that Emma at the beginning is being flippant about. There's a throughline to how that would lead to him stepping into Foster's role. But I can also see how it seems like he's suddenly changed, he's just on the straight and narrow now that he's working here.

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Isaac: Maybe money cures everything. At first, I didn't really like his character, especially when he gets her to smoke, but you reminded me of him using that as a means to call her out, to expose her lies and nudge her to face up to the truth, and admit that she's an addict.

Azura: Do you remember when Emma admits that Emma is actually her stage name and Sarah is her actual name, and up to this point Mark's been listening to her talk about acting and addiction, then suddenly he turns on her and says he can't trust anything she says? The writing has that jump where the actor has to believably fill in that gap.

Maybe it's a symptom of Mark's trajectory being what the playwright needed it to be in order to affect Emma in the right way at certain points?

In Duncan Macmillan's interview in the programme, he said he specifically wanted this play to have a female protagonist and pass the Bechdel test, so maybe he's subverting the gender expectations of who gets to be the protagonist and who gets to be the convenient supporting character who's written mainly to serve the protagonist's journey.

Azura: One moment I want to bring up is the last scene with the multiple Sarahs, where she's just come back into rehab in the second half, and she has an episode. So we get the multiple Sarahs again and they collapse again, but this time it ends with them cleaning her up. They were getting up, wiping her face, which I thought was really moving. A quiet, beautiful image on stage.

Isaac: Thinking about it, it's not just for the sake of logistics, for Emma to appear cleaned up. But it also feels like the different parts of her, which were in the throes of addiction, disappearing—they wiped her face and walked off. It could possibly signal that she is getting better.

Azura: And that she's starting to have the capacity to care for herself in a way that maybe she didn't before, when she was behaving in very self-destructive ways, or had nobody to help pick herself up, but now she does.

Azura: Should we do a roundup of our final thoughts?

Isaac: I guess it is a much-needed portrayal of addiction than what we usually see on TV and in movies—it shows it being more messy. Which is interesting, because, you know, stage time has more limits than what you can do in a movie.

Azura: They can really harness the power of people being together in a space and being able to go on this journey with Emma together. When the dad said "you should have died instead of Mark", you could hear the audience reacting, which is a very powerful thing to experience together. I appreciated that the playwright was trying to take a nuanced approach to the idea of addiction and acting, and how it affects some people and not others, and critiques of the 12-step programme.

Although—I'm not super familiar with Duncan Macmillan's style, but there were some scenes where it did become very talking-about-ideas, arguing about ideas, which after a certain point got me thinking, OK, how long is this going to go on? But it's a valid way to approach such a thorny topic.

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I do wonder what measures are in place during the rehearsal process for the actors to feel looked after with this subject matter. Even in group scenes in rehab, when each character tells their story for the first time, the actors have to immediately get to that place of talking about things with such high stakes, like their abusive husband, or a car crash. That's not easy either, because Emma goes on this journey, she's a protagonist, but the other actors have to get there immediately.

Isaac: Oh, yeah. Didn't think about it. As actors ourselves, we are very humbled and very envious.

Azura: Hats off to all of them. Maybe someday we can reach that level.

Writer's Statement

Each response published on Critics Circle Blog is paired with a statement from the writer where their politic, entry point, purpose, and intended audience is made clear.

Isaac Tan is a performer, writer, and educator who has been writing about the arts since 2011. He believes that every performance is an act of communication. His reviews are reflections of what he got as a receiver of this communication.

Azura: I viewed this conversation as a way to unpack and expand my own response to this multi-faceted show, informed by my perspective as a performer. As someone with no direct experience of addiction, I wanted to approach this discussion with care and respect for those who do, as well as for the cast and creatives who enact these stories.

This response to People, Places & Things was written at the invitation of Pangdemonium, who provided our writers with complimentary tickets in order to write the review.

People, Places & Things

Venue: Singtel Waterfront Theatre

Performed: 25 March- 9 April, 2023

Producing Company: Pangdemonium

Playwright: Duncan Macmillan

Director: Tracie Pang

Assistant Director: Timothy Koh

Movement Director: Andy Benjamin Cai

Cast: Shona Benson, Rebecca Ashley Dass, Rebekah Sangeetha Dorai, Sharda Harrison, Krissy Kesudason, Keagan Kang, Shane Mardjuki, Victoria Mintey, Adrian Pang, Jamil Schulze, Tan Guo Lian Sutton

Production Designer: Philip Engleheart

Lighting Designer: James Tan

Sound Artist, Composer: Jing Ng, Daniel Wong

Multimedia Designer: Genevieve Peck

Sound System Design: CTRL FRE@K

Hair Designer: Leong Lim #HAIRBYLEONG

Accent Coach: Petrina Kow

Stage Manager: Cat Andrade

Assistant Stage Manager: Nurliana Haron, Marilyn Chew

Technical Manager: Undo

Assistant Technical Manager: Zamier A Bakar

Set Design Assistant: Grace Lin

Props Master: Daniel Sim

Costume Coordinator: Noorasmidah Rashid

Assistant Costume Coordinator: Nurul Hikmah

Lead Dresser: Tabby Koh

Dresser: Nurhidayah Mahadi, Shafiq Mohmad

Hair Assistant:

Make-Up Special Effects Artist: Cherylynn Poh

Lighting Board Programmer: Low Wee Cheng

Multimedia Operator: Ian Lee

Sound Operator: Raymond Goei

Lighting Apprentice: Paul Lim

Stage Management Apprentice: Lee Jia Min